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THE BIBLE IN THE NEW LIGHT

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In the light of modern biblical research, commenced practically by George Smith in 1872, the once accepted view of the Bible's accuracy in the presentation of the various subjects of which it treats has undergone a more or less radical change in the minds of most scholars. A few, such as Professor Orr, still regard the Bible from the old "traditional" standpoint of its complete infallibility, but speaking generally, this is no longer admitted by biblical critics. Professor Driver, as a conservative member of this school, does not hesitate to say of the opening chapters of Genesis, which record the creation of the earth, of man, and the beginnings of human progress, that these chapters present no account of "the real beginnings" (*Genesis*, xlii), since it is certain that they contain statements "inconsistent with what is independently known of the early history of the earth, and of mankind upon it" (*ibid.*, 1). Such a conclusion, however, is not limited to the "early chapters," but is more or less applicable to almost the whole of the Old Testament records.

Now, this change amongst biblical scholars has not been made without having been noticed by the ordinary devout and thoughtful readers of the Bible, a recognition resulting in a disquietude which, beginning some twenty years back, has steadily kept pace with the "critics'" advance, until today biblical students are constantly being asked, "How are we to view the Bible in the light of modern research? If these things be true, is not the Bible in danger of losing its right to the title of the 'Word of God,' and if so, is not the very foundation upon which we have reared our social well-being, which is the Bible itself, threatened with destruction which will consequently cause the collapse of our whole social fabric?"

That this original and growing uneasiness, with its natural questionings as described, is no mere imagination of the present writer,

is proved in the first place by a series of lectures on "The Present Disquietude" delivered by Professor Sanday in 1890, and published by him the same year in book form under the title of *The Oracles of God*. Here, as the result of modern research up to that date, he did not hesitate to say, that "the sphere of the Bible's infallibility has been steadily narrowed" (16, 36). Now the very possibility of such narrowing existing in the Bible shows that it contains two elements, the human and the divine. And this Professor Sanday acknowledged in the second lecture, entitled, "The Human Element in the Bible," which he commenced with the words, "It has for a long time been distinctly recognized that there is a human as well as a divine element in the book by which God has been pleased to convey the revelation of himself to us" (15). The existence of this human element was further acknowledged by Rev. Chancellor Lias, who in a communication to *The Guardian*, November 10, 1897, wrote, "It becomes ever more clear to the Bible student that there is a large human element in Scripture." Writing to *The Christian World* in April of the previous year, Dean Farrar said, "I cannot name a single student or professor of any eminence in Great Britain who does not accept, with more or less modification, the main conclusions of the German school of critics." Again in November 24, 1897, a well-known scholar, Rev. R. L. Ottley, in *The Guardian*, wrote, "broadly speaking, the new critics have established their case."

In 1909, however, Professor Orr published his now famous work, entitled *The Problem of the Old Testament*, which purported to be a complete answer to the "critics." With delight it was hailed as such by the "traditionalists," and so accepted by the ordinary readers amongst them acquainted merely with the fact of the general critics' position touching the existence of the aforesaid two elements in the Bible. Unfortunately this jubilation was founded upon an assumed result which had no existence in fact. Nor is this surprising, since Professor Orr himself seems to have been entirely unaware that his whole attempt affected only the conclusions of a small school of hyper-critics, leaving untouched those of the general critic. He has attempted to show that the crux of the whole problem at issue lay in the question as to whether the religion of the Old Testament is "a natural product of the development of the human spirit, or, a

result of special, supernatural revelation to Israel, such as other nations did not possess" (4). Thus he refers to "the deep cleft" which remains between what he calls "the believing and the unbelieving view of the Old Testament, between the view which admits, and the view which denies, the properly supernatural element in the history and religion of Israel" (10).

Now, to one fully acquainted with the problem in dispute, it is evident that Professor Orr begins his inquiry by misstating the real point at issue. The *general* critic is not primarily concerned with the question as to whether or no Israel had a supernatural revelation differing in character from that possessed by other nations, but with the problem of separating what he, equally with Professor Orr, fully acknowledges to have been a revelation, from the human element in which at all times it was embodied. The "deep cleft" therefore between what Professor Orr calls the believing and the unbelieving view of the Old Testament has no actual existence, since the terms are altogether inapplicable as representing respectively the "traditionalists" and the "critics." Thus, despite the enthusiasm with which Professor Orr's volume was received by the "traditionalists," the general critic still continues his research along the lines indicated, and has been compelled by the result still further to narrow the sphere of the Bible's infallibility beyond the definite concessions made by Professor Sanday in 1890, although it is evident from his remarks that he foresaw the subsequent extension of the more *human* element. His lectures, as I said, were published under the title of *The Oracles of God*, which is merely another expression for the "Word of God." Now here is perhaps the most important point in the whole discussion. Can the Bible be accurately referred to as the "Word of God"? This, as I said at the opening of this paper, is the question on the lips of those who for the first time become thoroughly acquainted with the great change which has taken place in the modern scholars' view of the Bible. I have long believed that it is entirely misleading to call the Bible the "Word of God," or to use any phrase which similarly expresses the character of the contents of the Old Testament especially. For this reason I had objected to the definition used by Professor Bennett in his well-known volume on *The Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 3—"The Old Testament is the record of the

Revelation of God which he gave to mankind," and in its place proposed to him to substitute, "The Old Testament is the record of the growth of man's conception of God, aided by God." I claimed that there was here room left for the appearance in the Old Testament of man's mistakes and consequent misrepresentation of the will and character of God, which Dr. Bennett's expression did not allow for—in other words, for the due recognition of both the human and the divine elements, which I felt confident Dr. Bennett, equally with Dr. Sanday, admitted as existing in the Bible. In a correspondence of some length, Dr. Bennett endeavored to justify his expression while rejecting mine, for the following reasons. He wrote:

I believe that man's ideas of God are from the beginning due to a divine suggestion, and that man is continually educated by the Holy Spirit to grasp and interpret the divine revelation. "Aided by God" seems to me quite inadequate and even misleading as suggesting independent human research. Surely it is God that prompts men to seek after Himself. To me the Old Testament is the record of revelation; because, even in the early imperfect conceptions of God and His works, we learn that God did reveal, or was revealing Himself, though of course we also learn that human error distorted and adulterated the truth presented by God to men's minds. The Old Testament is the record of human misunderstanding as well as of Divine Revelation.

A record of human misunderstanding as well as of divine revelation; of human error distorting and adulterating the truth. Surely here is a joint action whichever way you put it. Is not every effort of man after good, however erroneously understood or mistakenly performed, a joint action between the man and his Maker? If man was made in the image of God he still possesses what may truly be called a natural endowment for seeking God, notwithstanding the original image has been marred by inherited and personal transgression. Here the scriptural precept in the case of wisdom applies equally to the Almighty "those that seek me diligently shall find me" (Prov. 8:7). Is it reasonable to suppose that man must have a fresh stimulus before he can commence to seek after God? I was not surprised, therefore, to receive a further communication from Dr. Bennett in which he said: "Probably my objection to your definition was too sweeping. I mentioned your sentence and mine to a friend for whose judgment I have great respect. He said that they seemed to him equivalent statements of the same truth." This was better,

although I still think that *my* definition leaves room for the presence of the human element which Dr. Bennett's seems to exclude. Indeed, his definition implies that the expression, "And God spake," means exactly what it says, whereas it actually means nothing more than what the speaker was about to utter, this that he himself assumed God had commissioned him to declare. This is the view of Rev. J. Paterson Smyth, author of numerous episcopally indorsed works on the Bible.

It is [he wrote to me] really the crux of the Old Testament study, what is the meaning of "The Lord said," "The Lord spake unto Moses." I believe it must be taken as the expression of the speaker's conviction that the utterance was of God, inspired of God, which conviction was justified, only the human element needs to be eliminated by us. . . . It was Moses' conception of the will of God. . . . Either this is true, or you must charge God with commanding what would rouse the whole church today in righteous indignation if it were commanded now. You must choose.

No, there is no necessity for us to choose. Christ did this for us and thereby became the first founder of modern criticism. The sayings, "An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth," and "love thy neighbor and hate thine enemy," notwithstanding that they comprise commands which had been given under the heading, "The Lord said," Christ set aside with the clear intimation that they were of human origin merely, and in no sense the utterances of God at any time (Matt. 5:33; cf. Exod. 20:22; 21:24, 25; Matt. 5:42; cf. Exod. 33:1, 2; Deut. 7:1; 23:3-7). And this is plain, for while man's conception of the law of God must necessarily change with the development of his ethical standards, God's own law never changes, since God is the same always (Mal. 3:6).

In a recent lecture on "The Teaching of the Old Testament," given by the Dean of Ely to students attending a Sunday-school teachers' training class, the speaker said, "You must not be surprised to find in the Old Testament much that belongs to the spirit and temper of the age in which it was written . . . strange ancient traditions . . . legends, myths, and allegories, which were the natural shapes in which men embodied their beliefs" (*The Guardian*, September 22, 1909). To this we may also add, "many enactments utterly incompatible with any real law of God," since the ethical codes of the Old Testament contain much that was also the outcome of the spirit and

temper of the age in which they were promulgated. Now all this—the myths, legends, and traditions, the faulty science, history, and morals—constitutes the human element in the Bible, to which the well-known scholar, Canon Beeching, in a recent sermon in Westminster Abbey, referred as “forming no part of divine revelation at all.” “We cannot,” he added, “if we use language accurately, identify the Bible with ‘the Word of God’; we must say rather that it contains God’s word, and is inspired so far as it contains it” (*The Guardian*, October 20, 1909).

From all this it will be seen that in order to recognize where the real message of the Bible lies, it is first necessary to understand its character and purpose. Its purpose is exclusively religious, the object of its writers being neither the teaching of science nor history, but of God and his requirements. Here, and here only, is the sphere of the Bible’s *infallibility*, since here exists only the divine element. All else—matters of contemporary knowledge of every kind, with its myths, legends, and traditions—comprises the sphere of the Bible’s *fallibility*, since here exists only the human element. As for the character, or outward structure of the Bible, it is no different in kind from the Bibles of other ancient peoples, since equally with theirs it is made up of much that is ridiculous, supernaturally extravagant, and even shockingly horrible. It is equally true, however, that the Old Testament differs so considerably in degree from the character of other Bibles, that it is only the student or the more thoughtful reader who can detect anything in its pages clearly contrary to the spirit of a divine revelation. It is there, however, and its existence is practically conceded even by Professor Orr, who admits, that to the enlightened conscience, the Old Testament contains difficulties which “perplex and stagger us” (435). It is, however, one of the objects of this series to show that *no* such result need follow if it be borne in mind that it is not in the *body* of information which comprises the Old Testament that we are to see its divine revelation, but in the spirit which animates it throughout.